



**Marriage and Parenthood Trends:  
some suggestions from AWARE  
A submission to the NPTD office**

Date of this document: **24 July 2012**

© AWARE 2012

Block 5 Dover Crescent #01-22 Singapore 130005

T: 6779 7137 F: 6777 0318

Helpline: 1800 774 5935

Website: [www.aware.org.sg](http://www.aware.org.sg) E-mail: [ed@aware.org.sg](mailto:ed@aware.org.sg)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior permission of AWARE.

## Introduction

AWARE thanks the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) for inviting views from the public on how to improve Singapore's birth rate and how different stakeholders can help to foster a supportive environment for family life to encourage fertility decision-making by couples.

AWARE has been providing feedback on population and fertility issues since 1988. Our first position paper (1988) highlighted the need to **determine the optimum population size for Singapore**.<sup>1</sup> At that time, experts' projections for 2030 ranged from 3.4 million to 4 million.

Singapore's population is now close to 5.2 million, having doubled in about 25 years. **Questions about our optimal population size and the optimal rate of growth remain as relevant as ever.** This is particularly so in relation to many of the everyday problems experienced by Singaporeans, such as the over-burdened transport infrastructure, unaffordable housing, an over-crowded and perhaps increasingly un-livable city, lower wages for the majority, and the widening income gap. These add up to a lower quality of life for many.

In 2004, AWARE's position paper *Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?* concluded:<sup>2</sup>

**“The quality of life is the single most important reason why Singaporeans are not having more children.”**

This finding derived from a public survey we conducted on people's decisions to have babies. We also looked at how Denmark, Norway, Japan and Korea are dealing with the TFR issue.

The TFR issue is fundamentally linked to quality of life issues – i.e. the general well-being of individuals and societies.<sup>3</sup> If citizens do not have a sense of well-being and security, they will not be inclined to take on additional responsibilities of parenting and caregiving.

**To address TFR, we must therefore look at all policies that affect our citizens' quality of life, including policies on education, health, housing, employment and retirement.**

In its 2004 paper, AWARE pinpointed the following changes as particularly relevant to TFR:

- a. **Prioritise gender equality** so that the issues of fertility and caregiving are not placed primarily on women
- b. **Adequate support structures for families**, including the availability of **flexi-work arrangements**
- c. **Changes in the education system** to lessen competitive pressure in schools and to ensure intergenerational social mobility

---

<sup>1</sup> AWARE 'Population: An Issue of Current Concern' [http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Population\\_Position\\_Paper\\_1988.pdf](http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Population_Position_Paper_1988.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> AWARE 'Beyond Babies: National Position or Personal Choice' <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Babies-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 'Quality of life' should not be confused with 'standard of living'. While the latter is mainly based on income, the former includes all conditions contributing to the well-being of individuals and societies, including the built environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation and leisure time, and social belonging.

- d. **Fairer distribution of benefits** to ensure that the families that need most help receive it. In particular, unmarried mothers and mothers in low-income households should receive the same support given to married and/or middle-class mothers.

AWARE thus makes the following recommendations to the NTPD.

## **A. Approach the TFR issue holistically**

We reiterate our call from 1988 to the Government to address some key questions:

- a. Based on current research, what would be the **optimum population size** and the **optimum annual rate of growth** for this island with its limited resources? What policies and strategies are appropriate under such conditions?
- b. The population explosion (including the non-resident population) in the last 25 years has impacted on the quality of life in Singapore. **What measures are needed to ensure that our population does not grow faster than people and infrastructure can cope with?** We hope that prioritisation of the TFR issue would not lead to an over-emphasis on increasing population at all costs in order to meet workforce needs.
- c. If the issue that we are concerned about is that of an ageing population and shrinking workforce, **it may not be cost – effective to try to reverse the declining TFR.** The TFR has been below replacement since 1975, despite the numerous schemes and incentives offered to individuals. Studies<sup>4</sup> indicate that increasing the TFR from 1.2 to 1.85 (a highly ambitious target) will only ameliorate the situation marginally.

Should we instead **focus** our energies on **alternative solutions** that are more **cost-effective** in ameliorating the issue of our ageing population and shrinking workforce?

**Utmost priority should be given to maximizing the latent talent** we have in Singapore by:

- i) ensuring that children are not prematurely excluded from our talent pool before they receive adequate education; and
- ii) providing more supportive conditions of work and life so that women who leave the workforce to be caregivers are able to return when their wards are sufficiently independent.

## **B. Prioritise gender equality**

Current state policies, such as the 16-week mandatory paid maternity leave and no mandated paid paternity leave for fathers, place issues of **fertility** firmly in the realm of **women's choice and domain**. These **perpetuate a familial form that is premised on**

---

<sup>4</sup> Scenarios of Future Population Growth and Change in Singapore, Institute of Policy Studies, 9 September 2011

**the traditional role of men as breadwinner, women as caregiver. This model is neither realistic nor fair, given the aspirations and talents of our well-educated women and men.**

The experience of the Scandinavian countries shows that gender equality can make a significant difference to maintaining high TFRs.

An MCYS survey (2009) showed that fathers were not as involved as mothers in the lives of their children, despite 99% of all respondents stating that they feel that parenting responsibilities should be shared equally between men and women.<sup>5</sup>

**Policy recommendations:**

**a. Make gender equality a core value in all policies aimed at supporting families.**

The legislative basis for this is already set out in the Women’s Charter (Section 46):

“The husband and the wife shall be mutually bound to co-operate with each other in safeguarding the interests of the union and in caring and providing for the children.”

“The husband and the wife shall have equal rights in the running of the matrimonial household”.

**b. Legislate at least two weeks of paid paternity leave, with the cost shared between the employer and the State.**

The lack of paternity leave perpetuates the misconception that parenting is synonymous with mothering. It also makes employers reluctant to hire women, thereby negatively impacting on women and reducing Singapore’s talent pool. To have both paternity and maternity leave will lessen the impact on women and will drive home the point that family management and parenting is a collective responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Paternity leave expands men’s opportunities to be involved in the most valuable aspects of parenting – actually spending time with their children, not just paying for their expenses – and respects men’s right to family life beyond just being breadwinners.

**c. Convert four weeks of the 16-week maternity leave to parental leave to be taken by either spouse.** There should be a built-in incentive for fathers to take the parental leave.

**d. Education and awareness: active parenting by men should be promoted** and misinformed stereotypes of fatherhood and manhood should be dispelled. Start in schools.

**e. Avoid implementing policies that reinforce the traditional roles** of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers e.g. providing or increasing leave benefits for mothers only (and not fathers) to take care of children.

### **C. Provide more support for all types of families**

---

<sup>5</sup> MCYS Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009 – survey of 2,200 men

<sup>6</sup> AWARE, ‘Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?’ <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Babies-Report.pdf>

The State has **addressed the issue of care-giving at the level of individual families** – for example, offering maternity leave, baby bonuses, tax reliefs and the choice to hire domestic help – **rather than at the public level**, i.e. providing universally accessible childcare support in various forms to all families. Many current schemes reflect remnants of the notion that it is the higher-income and better-educated who ought to have more children. To build a truly inclusive society, where all citizens have equal rights to the same public support and where citizens feel obligated to support their fellow citizens, policies should not differentiate between citizens along socioeconomic or other lines. Schemes that are overly individualised encourage cost-benefit analyses and a sense that people should take care of their own narrow interests and needs, which is antithetical to building true community.

#### **(i) Flexible working arrangements and support from employers**

Singapore currently has the longest working hours<sup>7</sup> in the world and **employers are still reluctant to introduce measures at the workplace to help employees achieve a balance between work and family life**. In 2010, only 35 percent of private-sector employees were offered at least one form of flexible work schedule.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of a family-oriented work culture exacerbates the problem of a low TFR, as people are forced to choose between work and family. **Full-time employment and childcare** are seen and experienced as **nearly mutually exclusive**.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Incentivise employers to adopt flexible working arrangements, reduce working hours in their organisations, and set up childcare facilities at the workplace.** Incentives need to go beyond awards and encouragement. The Government has made great effort to get employers to hire and retain older Singaporeans; large public funds have been channeled to companies for training and upgrading support. Similar creative energies and funds can and should be directed toward pushing companies to support work-life balance.
- b. **Public funds should pay for all parental leave provisions**, not just 50% for the first two children (with employer bearing the other half). This is necessary if we are to prevent employers from seeing women as potential parents, who are more expensive to hire than men, who are presumed to be non-parents – a gender differentiation that is discriminatory to both women and men.
- c. **Convert the currently mandated 6 days of paid childcare leave into leave for the care of dependents**, who may include older children (not just babies) and elderly parents. This would also help to reduce any resentment that non-parents have in covering for colleagues who take time off for their children. It also provides more support for working Singaporeans who have different groups of dependents relying on them.

---

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organisation, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Manpower, 'Conditions of Employment 2010'  
[http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd\\_coe2010.pdf](http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd_coe2010.pdf)

- d. Consider implementing the UK scheme where the employee has a **statutory right to request flexible working arrangements** if he or she has a child aged under 16 or a child with a disability under the age of 18. The employer has a statutory duty to consider the request seriously and to refuse it only if there are clear business grounds for doing so.
- e. Ensure that employment **policies that support parenting responsibilities** are extended to both **men and women**.

#### **(ii) Improve childcare facilities**

Parents' need for affordable and adequate childcare centres is still insufficiently met.

##### **Policy recommendations:**

- a. All parents should have **access to high quality, affordable childcare services**.<sup>9</sup>
- b. **Infant care**, in particular, should be **expanded** and made more **affordable**.<sup>10</sup>
- c. Situate **before and after-school centres within schools**. Again, ensure that it is universally accessible.
- d. **Synchronise school hours with the working hours** of parents, as far as possible.
- e. **Access to childcare subsidies, motherhood benefits and housing benefits should be widened to include all parents**, without discriminating against unwed mothers, stay-at-home mothers and fathers, whether married or single.

#### **(iii) Provide more protection for mothers in the workplace**

There should be **stricter measures to stop employers from discriminating against** or even sacking **pregnant mums or parents with many children**. As of July 2012, AWARE's Helpline provided help to 17 pregnant women being sacked for being pregnant. This was an increase over 2011 when we had 16 cases for the whole year.

##### **Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Maternity protection should start from the time that the employer knows the employee is pregnant** (instead of after the first trimester).
- b. **Consider implementing an Anti-Discrimination Act** that many countries have as part of the arsenal of laws to protect workers from discrimination, including discrimination against pregnant mother and mothers in general.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Manpower, 'Conditions of Employment 2010'  
[http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd\\_coe2010.pdf](http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd_coe2010.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> AWARE's recommendations for Budget 2012, <http://www.aware.org.sg/2012/02/aware-calls-for-an-inclusive-2012-singapore-budget/>

#### **(iv) Returning to work**

Women who take time off to provide care find it hard to re-enter the workforce. The trend of women's workforce participation rates declining from the age of 30 onwards indicates that those who leave the workforce do not tend to return. This trend deters some women from taking time off to have a baby.

This is something that should receive far greater attention than it currently does. It makes sense to direct resources to this issue, if we wish to maintain a strong workforce and ensure that all members of society are able to attain their aspirations for work and family.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Facilitate the re-entry of employees** into the workforce after childbirth and provide job security when they do return to the workplace.
- b. **Protect mothers** who are trying to get back into paid work **from discriminatory practices** that make it not worth their while to re-enter the workforce.
- c. Pay **particular attention to women in low-income households** who face particular difficulties in securing good jobs with decent incomes.

### **D. Education policies – reducing the pressure and cost of education**

Many Singaporeans will not have children until they are confident that they can assume the roles of good fathers or mothers. This includes ensuring that their children can succeed in school. We should laud our fellow citizens for thinking so responsibly. We should then **consider if the pressures placed on parents, teachers and children in schools are sensible**. Extra tutoring has become part and parcel of our education system. Indeed, it seems it is not possible to succeed in our “public” schools without considerable “private” investments. This **situation affects people's understanding of what parenting entails and parents' quality of life**.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Reform the education system to ensure that it requires from students only what is taught in schools**. This is important if we are to ensure that our children are not prematurely streamed out of the system, before they have really had the opportunity to develop.

### **E. Focus on improving people's sense of security and belonging**

Implement policies that will improve people's sense of security and belonging. Aside from work-life balance policies, **policies relating to housing, health, employment and retirement shape how people think about their future**. Their imaginations of the future in turn influence their decision whether or not to have children.

**Social support** for the lower income and vulnerable groups **must be expanded**. Women and men will generally not want to have children until they feel financially secure. Given the high cost of living, they will usually not feel financially secure until they are in their late 20s or early 30s. If public housing is more affordable and the state is seen as more

supportive of the poor or people who find themselves in financial distress, people may feel more confident to start a family at an earlier age.

**Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Lower the cost of public housing** and expand access.
- b. **Expand support for caregivers, the disabled and the poor.**<sup>11</sup>

**F. Fairer distribution of benefits and support**

**Family policies and benefits** should be **implemented in a way that does not discriminate** against lower income families, unwed mothers or non-Singaporean mothers. The current exclusion of unmarried parents from certain housing benefits, parental leave, subsidies and bonuses are not only **unfair** but they **hurt the families who most need the support**. If there is any bias, it should be in favour of these groups that are in need of support.

**Policy recommendations:**

- a. **Review** the current overarching policy that limits **the definition of family** to married parents.
- b. **Widen access to childcare subsidies, motherhood benefits and housing benefits to include all mothers**, without discriminating against unwed mothers.
- c. **Discard the Parents Tax Rebate and Working Mothers Child Relief policies** that are biased in favour of working mothers (but not stay-at-home mothers) and higher paid working women.
- d. **Grant rights of citizenship to foreign mothers of Singaporean children** so that their families are able to remain intact. This is increasingly significant; in 2008, around 30% of all Singaporean children had one non-citizen parent, an increase from about 22% in 1998. Seventy percent of these had non-citizen mothers.<sup>12</sup>

**G. Provide more support for stay-at-home caregivers**

People who take time off to provide care do so at very high personal cost during the time they stay out of the workforce and when they want to re-enter the workforce. **Stay-at-home caregivers are particularly disadvantaged** when they themselves get older as the current **social security system is premised on employment**.

---

<sup>11</sup> AWARE's recommendations for Budget 2012, <http://www.aware.org.sg/2012/02/aware-calls-for-an-inclusive-2012-singapore-budget/>

<sup>12</sup> National Population Secretariat, *An Occasional Paper on Marriages between Singapore Citizens and Non-Singapore Citizens 1998-2008*, p.7.



**Policy recommendations:**

- a. Where one spouse is working in a salaried job and the other is a full-time care-giver, **mandate or provide incentives for the salaried spouse to transfer a portion of his / her CPF into the CPF account of the care-giving spouse.**
- b. Alternatively, give families the choice to treat a spouse's CPF as a **joint family CPF** rather than an individual CPF owned solely by the income earner.
- c. Many caregivers work on contract rather than on full-time employment. **Extend CPF to cover all contract workers.**
- d. **Provide Medishield coverage for stay-at-home spouses**, with the State paying the premiums for lower income families.

**H. Provide more support for divorced parents**

With a significant number of marriages ending in divorce, steps need to be taken to ensure that divorced single mothers and their children do not fall into a poverty trap. Steps can be taken to enable such mothers to claim maintenance for themselves and their children. On the other hand, **single fathers with dependent children should qualify for tax relief on the levy for hiring a foreign domestic worker**, a perk currently enjoyed by mothers only.

**Policy recommendations:**

- a. Implement a **central collection agency for maintenance payments.**
- b. Enable **single fathers** with dependent children to **qualify for the tax relief** on the levy for **hiring a foreign domestic worker.**

**I. Provide more support for women who want to have their children later**

The declining TFR has been attributed to people getting married later. It is arguable whether this is really the cause of declining TFR. There is a correlation between declining TFR and the increasing median age of first marriage. However, it is not clear what the relationship is between these two trends.

Even if declining TFR is caused by later marriage, given the high cost of living, the emphasis on education and work, and the national ethos to be self-reliant, it may not be possible or cost-effective to try to reverse this trend. Further, the divorce rate is the highest for the 20-24 age group<sup>13</sup>.

Instead, AWARE urges the State to **support and promote the use of technologies that enable older women to have babies.**

---

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports 'State of the Family Report 2009'  
<http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/portals/0/summary/publication/NFC-StateoftheFamilyReport2009.pdf>

## Policies to Implement

- a. **Increase the subsidies for in-vitro fertilization and maintain the same level for subsidy for subsequent treatments.** Such support is extremely targeted at women who desire to have kids and who need this financial support as in-vitro treatment is expensive.

## G. No More National Campaigns, Please

The State should providing an enabling environment for its citizens to children but it should refrain from carrying out national campaigns that tell people how they should lead their lives.

The public survey AWARE carried out in 2004<sup>14</sup> found that “Many see fertility decisions as a private matter between couples and would prefer the government not to intervene directly, but rather remove the obstacles to having [more] children.

## List of References

- AWARE, 1988. *Population: An Issue of Current Concern*. [http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Population\\_Position\\_Paper\\_1988.pdf](http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Population_Position_Paper_1988.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2012).
- AWARE, 2004. *Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?*. <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Babies-Report.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2012).
- AWARE, 2012. *Feedback for the Singapore Budget 2012 - Calling for an Inclusive Budget for a Caring Society*. <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Full-Submission-AWAREs-Feedback-For-Singapore-Budget-2012.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2012).
- Institute of Policy Studies , *Scenarios of Future Population Growth and Change in Singapore*, 9 September 2011
- International Labour Organisation. *Global Wage Report Update 2009*. [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/news/WCMS\\_116500/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/news/WCMS_116500/lang-en/index.htm) (accessed 13 July 2012).
- Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports, 2009. *Fatherhood Public Perception Survey Key Findings*.
- Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. 2009. *State of the Family Report 2009*. <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/portals/0/summary/publication/NFC-StateoftheFamilyReport2009.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2012).
- Ministry of Manpower, 2010. *Conditions of Employment 2010*. [http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd\\_coe2010.pdf](http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd_coe2010.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2012).

---

<sup>14</sup> AWARE, ‘Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?’ <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Babies-Report.pdf>

National Population Secretariat, 2009. *An Occasional Paper on Marriages between Singapore Citizens and Non-Singapore Citizens 1998-2008*.

[https://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/NPTD/news/\\_jcr\\_content/par\\_content/download\\_4/file.res/Marriages%20between%20citizens%20and%20non-citizens.%201998-2008.pdf](https://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/NPTD/news/_jcr_content/par_content/download_4/file.res/Marriages%20between%20citizens%20and%20non-citizens.%201998-2008.pdf) (accessed 14 July 2012).