

MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

Luring the stork

Government announces review marriage and parenthood policies

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SINGAPORE – If not for the time spent searching for a flat, and wanting to feel financially secure before proposing to his then-girlfriend, Mr Kelvin Chow, 31, reckons he would have said “I do” sooner.

He might have waited even longer, had he not opted for a resale flat instead of applying for a new flat.

Having got married last December, Mr Chow and his wife are now planning for a family. “Costs will just keep going up, so it makes more sense to have a kid now,” the research analyst said.

As for lawyer Lam Sin Yee, 31, she

has “no particular desire or non-desire” to get married but having children is certainly not on the agenda.

“I like my freedom and it’s too much of a sacrifice,” said Ms Lam, adding that she does not think the culture here “encourages people to get married”.

As the Republic continues to be one of the stork’s least favourite destinations, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean yesterday announced a review of marriage and parenthood policies.

The median age of Singaporeans will rise from 39 today to 47 by 2030, with the number of elderly citizens tripling to 900,000, said Mr Teo at the NUS Global Asia Institute Signature Conference.

He said creating a supportive environment to form families and raise children remains a “key Government priority in addressing the population

challenge”, and that the Marriage and Parenthood Package has improved over the years and helped many Singaporeans.

An occasional paper on marriage and parenthood trends was also released yesterday by the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) to facilitate discussions. The public is invited to provide feedback at www.reach.gov.sg/feedback.aspx.

According to the occasional paper, the families of some 350,000 children have benefited from the Marriage and Parenthood Package since it was rolled out in 2001. It was last enhanced in 2008, and a household with two children and an income of S\$8,000 receives the equivalent of about S\$142,000 — through Baby Bonus cash and co-savings, infant care subsidies and other measures — until both children turn seven.

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WAYS TO GET MORE TO MARRY EARLIER, HAVE MORE BABIES

To encourage people to have more children, observers suggested measures including more healthcare subsidies, paternity leave, more flexi-work provisions, and ensuring the low-income earn enough to grow their families.

Workplace conditions need to be more flexible to promote dual-income, dual-caregiver families, said Association of Women for Action and Research Executive Director Corinna Lim.

Policies that may be “holding the men back from participating more” should also be changed — for starters, fathers could be allowed two weeks of paternity leave, she said.

Ms Lim also noted that countries with shared parental leave made it such that part of the leave was forfeited if the father did not take it.

“Now, it’s become a way of life. It’s not always true that the culture must lead and then the laws follow. The laws can actually change the culture,” she said.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan suggested an output-based approach to measure employees’ performance instead of their time spent in the office.

Calling on policymakers to look at the wages of those who depend on overtime pay, she added: “If a person works a regular full-time job, the pay from that full-time job must be suffi-

cient for him to grow a family. If not, then our pay structure is clearly out of line with cost of living.”

NPTD’s paper also showed that singlehood rates among citizens aged 30 to 34 shot up from 33 per cent to 44 per cent for males between 2000 and last year, and from 22 per cent to 31 per cent for females.

Family life champion Anita Fam suggested making housing more affordable so Singaporeans may purchase their homes at a younger age, addressing the lack of work-life balance, as well as changing certain mindsets.

Ms Fam, who chairs the advisory board of Marriage Central, noted that the notion that a big wedding dinner is a must-have could also be an impediment to marrying earlier.

Speaking in her personal capacity, she said: “The aspiration to get married is very strong, but Singaporeans are so pragmatic.”

The paper also showed that more are marrying and starting families with non-Singaporeans: Marriages between a citizen and non-citizen made up about four in 10 marriages involving at least one citizen last year, and three in 10 Singaporeans babies born last year had one parent who was a non-citizen.

The statistic is cause to rethink the Republic’s stance on dual citizenship, said Prof Straughan. “Because of their parentage, you cannot consider them in the same category (as those who ‘shop’ around for citizenship),” she said.