

New Scholars

**RE-PRODUCING CITIZENS: GENDER, EMPLOYMENT,
AND WORK-FAMILY BALANCE POLICIES IN SINGAPORE***

SHIRLEY HSIAO-LI SUN

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the effectiveness of state work-family balance policies in shaping individual reproductive decisions in Singapore, the city-state that ranked third in the *Global Competitiveness Report 2009–2010* (World Economic Forum, 2009). I draw on in-depth data from interviews with women of childbearing years, as well as data from focus group discussions with women and their peers, spouses, prospective spouses, and parents. Major findings suggest that to be effective, the state's work-family balance policy measures have to recognize citizens' diverse life plans as well as the attendant requests for certain state benefits and workplace rights—such as expanding the quota for paid maternity and paternity leave, having family leave financed by the government rather than by the employer, protecting individuals from dismissal on the grounds of leave of absence, and guaranteeing Singaporean workers the right to request shorter, flexible working hours. Despite the limitations of nonprobability sampling, this study indicates that individual preference is associated with an individual's educational attainment and ethnicity. Finally, this study concludes that the effectiveness of any work-family balance policy is a function not merely of individual aspirations but also of the perceived consequences of meeting workplace expectations; thus, the current policies are particularly ineffective in addressing the concerns of employees in private firms. Taken together, these findings suggest that the state needs to reconsider the economic production-at-all-cost approach and become more proactive in supporting workers' right to paid employment and family life.

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INTRODUCTION

I examine Singaporean work-family balance policies—one of the major components of the pronatalist policy incentives adopted by the Singapore government—and their effectiveness in encouraging individuals to have their desired number of children. As Saw (2005: 6) notes, “those policies adopted by government to persuade their people to produce fewer children in order to lower the rate of population growth are known as antinatalist policies, while those meant to do the exact opposite are known as pronatalist policies.” In the case of Singapore, a wide range of such policies has been implemented since the late 1980s, with the latest emphasis being on work-family balance. For instance, under the Children Development Co-Savings Act established in 2001, an employee is entitled to maternity leave benefits if, first, the child is a Singapore citizen; second, the child’s parents are lawfully married; and third, the employee has worked for an employer for at least 90 days before the child’s birth (Ministry of Manpower, 2009b).

The combination of high female labor force participation and high fertility level has been noted in Sweden, and scholars have attributed it to the role of public policies (Andersson, 2008; Olah, 2003). The empirical existence of such a successful combination suggests that it is neither female labor force participation nor the state’s expectation of women playing a dual role as both workers and parents per se that explains the ineffectiveness of pronatalist policies. Given the literature on the emerging heterogeneity of life plans, women and men may aspire to be both workers and parents. They may also aspire to focus on one sphere of life. The question of the kind of aspirations individuals have in a given group or society needs to be empirically investigated rather than assumed. Moreover, the Swedish case suggests the importance of public policy in supporting individuals’ efforts to deal with work-family conflict. The kind of public policy that would be effective remains, however, an empirical question. In other words, existing studies have yet to answer certain questions. For example: What are women’s and men’s aspirations in relation to work and family life in postindustrial countries in Asia, such as Singapore? How do career-oriented men and women respond to the latest pronatalist policy measures supporting work-life balance? To what extent are their responses different from or similar to their family-oriented counterparts’ responses? What kind of state initiatives might enable women and men to have the number of children they want to have?

In addition, what may be the implications of economic structural change for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of work-family balance policies? Studies have indicated that public sector employment in Singapore decreased from 20% of total employment in the 1980s to less than 10% in the 1990s (Lim, 1983; Schiavo-Campo, de Tommaso, & Mukherjee, 1997). Moreover, the service sector is gaining increasing importance in both its contribution to the GDP and its share in the labor market. According to the General Household Survey (Singapore

Department of Statistics, 2005: 29), “long hours were more common among sales and service workers, with 31 per cent clocking 60 hours or more per week in 2005.”

I draw on data collected in a multilevel qualitative study conducted between October 2007 and July 2008, consisting of semistructured personal interviews with women of childbearing age, as well as interviews in focus groups with the women and their peers, spouses, prospective spouses, and parents. My major findings suggest that to be effective, work-family balance policy measures have to acknowledge and respect citizens’ varying life plans. For instance, family-oriented women who would ideally like to quit their jobs welcome more days of paid maternity leave. In sharp contrast, women who ideally want to keep working after having children have strong reservations over the existing paid maternity leave, as their concern is the lack of legal protection of their jobs if they take such leave. In order to make paid maternity leave policy effective for career-oriented women, the state needs to provide legal protection against company dismissal on the grounds of family leave of absence, especially for employees of private firms.

As far as fathers and prospective fathers are concerned, extra days of paid paternity leave would help, but this is not the deciding factor for them when considering an additional child. The men in this study place more emphasis on financial concerns than on the number of paternity leave days. However, some men, especially in the younger generation, also think that there are good reasons—such as supporting their wives—why paternity leave should be extended, again, particularly in the private sector. Finally, respondents strongly suggest that such family leave provisions need to be financed by the government rather than paid for by employers. The implications of the findings for the state-corporate relationship are discussed further in the concluding section.

STATE WORK-FAMILY BALANCE POLICIES

As Yamaguchi and Lee (2008: 7) point out, “generally, we can expect that the relationship between female labor-force participation and fertility rate is not uniform but varies with the extent to which work-family balance can be attained and thereby reduce the opportunity costs of childrearing.” Recent studies have looked into different forms of state pronatalist policies supporting work-family balance—including, but not limited to, maternity and paternity leave and the accessibility of child care services—and their impact on individual childbearing behavior (Bonoli, 2008; Castles, 2003; Letablier, 2003; Risse, 2006; Ronsen, 2004). Moreover, it is not just work-family policies that are important but also the “gendered” context in which such policies take effect. McDonald (2000: 427) suggests that “very low fertility in advanced countries today is an outcome of a conflict or inconsistency between high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social

institutions.” Olah (2003: 193) finds that “couples who share family responsibilities more equally have higher second-birth intensity than others when policies facilitate the combination of employment and parenting for either parent.” In other words, low fertility is driven by the discrepancy between gender equality in the public sphere and gender inequality in the private sphere.

While Olah’s and McDonald’s frameworks treat men and women as constituting homogeneous groups, Hakim (2003: 369-370), presenting the findings of a national survey carried out in Britain, proposes that the development of public policy needs to start with the recognition that individuals differ in their values, goals, and aspirations: “when women control their own fertility, it is their preferences and values that shape responses to public policy. And public policy has not, in practice, paid much attention to women’s wishes.” Sweden stands out as a case in which population policies respect and recognize heterogeneity in the life plans of citizens. In his review of research on the role that social and family policies play in fertility in Sweden, Andersson (2008: 90) writes:

It is important to note that Swedish family policy has never specifically targeted childbearing but has rather aimed at strengthening women’s participation in the labor market and promoting gender and social equality. The focus has been on enabling individuals to pursue their family and occupational tracks without being too dependent on other persons or being constrained by institutional factors. In terms of childbearing, the goal is to enable women and men to raise the number of children they want to have.

In Asian countries, studies indicate a slowly emerging heterogeneity in women’s relationship with paid employment and the family. Japan and South Korea register relatively high scores on the United Nations Gender-related Development Index (GDI) (United Nations Development Programme, 2010a). However, Japan’s score is average on the United Nations Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) while Korea scores relatively low on this measure, which examines the extent to which women and men actually participate in economic and political life (United Nations Development Programme, 2010b). In the case of South Korea, Choe (2006) highlights the increasing trend of women entering career-oriented jobs and the fact that the desire of the majority of nonworking married women is to be employed, if not for the problem of child care. Employed women also experience stress in juggling work and home responsibilities. In Japan, Ogawa, Retherford, and Matsukura (2006: 66-67) suggest that in order to improve pronatalist policy effectiveness, “it is useful to consider the effects of these [pronatalist] programs on two groups of women: those who work for pay outside the home and those who do not work for pay outside the home.” Quah (2009: 116) documents the fact that women find work and family responsibilities irreconcilable without men’s sharing family responsibilities in Hong Kong and Singapore: “Hong Kong and particularly Singapore women join the labour force in large proportions in their twenties but their resolve to tackle both home

and job commitments (the Two-Role ideology) falters and they begin withdrawing steadily from the labour force after marriage or after the arrival of their first child due to the burden of family obligations.” More importantly, Quah (2009: 127) emphasizes that “the higher status given to the husband as the principal economic provider has not changed much in the past three decades, at least not in Asia although working women’s earnings in the wealthier countries—Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore—are increasing.” Thus, Quah (2009: 128) suggests that “the main challenge for sociologists studying gender roles is to identify through further research the best possible avenues for both men and women to be able to attain their life and family goals at minimum cost and optimum gain. The Shared Roles ideology may be one of several possibilities.”

In summary, our understanding of the effectiveness of work-family balance policies has been furthered by the above-mentioned research conducted in advanced industrialized countries. Taken together, the studies suggest that there is a need to analyze policy effectiveness in relation to the possible differences in priority that individual women and men place on family and on paid employment. Moreover, it is important to pay attention to local work cultures. In what follows, I provide a succinct review of studies carried out on the topic of gender and Singapore’s pronatalist work-family balance policies.

FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND WORK-FAMILY BALANCE POLICIES IN SINGAPORE

Singapore became a postindustrialized society in the late 1990s (Lian, 2008), and it ranked third in the *Global Competitiveness Report 2009-2010* (World Economic Forum, 2009). The country’s economic success is built upon a number of key institutional provisions, among other factors. The social security system, the Central Provident Fund, hinges on individuals’ paid employment (Low, 2004). The National Wages Council sets the wage guidelines for the economy as a whole, but there is no prescribed or fixed minimum wage (Ministry of Manpower, 2009c). The Employment Act regulates rest days, hours of work, and other working conditions. For instance, an employee is entitled to one rest day per week and annual leave ranging from 7 to 14 days depending on years of service, but there is no statutory entitlement to marriage, paternity, or compassionate leave (Ministry of Manpower, 2009a). Moreover, according to Chua and Tan (1999: 136),

Domestically, this successful political economy is characterised by the use of monopolistic statutory boards to provide a high level of basic collective-consumption goods and services for the entire population. These provisions have the apparent effect of homogenising the lifestyle of the nation: an overwhelming 85 per cent of the people live in subsidised public-housing flats within estates that have the same level of provisions of ancillary facilities for daily needs, for example, shopping facilities are everywhere, an

overwhelming majority of children go to neighbourhood schools, where education is effectively free up to secondary level; and these public-housing residents are well served by the mass rapid transit (MRT) system.

In addition, the female labor force participation rate (LFPR) stood at 55.6% in 2008. On the other hand, the total fertility rate declined from 3.07 per resident female in 1970 to 1.28 in 2008 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009a). The government has offered a range of monetary and nonmonetary incentives since 1987 to encourage childbearing (Yap, 2009). Five “work-life support” pronatalist policy initiatives were in place when the present study was carried out: (1) public sector flexible work (in place since 2000) and the five-day workweek (since 2004); (2) public sector leave (since 2000); (3) third child maternity leave (since 2000) and extra paid maternity leave (since 2004); (4) paid child care leave (since 2004); and (5) the “Work-Life Works!” fund (since 2004).

1. The five-day workweek for civil servants: The flexible work arrangement was instituted in 2000, and there was a shift from a five-and-a-half-day workweek to a five-day workweek in the civil service in 2004. The total number of hours for every employee remained at 42 per week.
2. Public sector leave: Government employees were permitted to take three days’ paid marriage leave when getting married for the first time, and fathers in the civil service were permitted to take three days’ paternity leave for their first three children.
3. Extra paid maternity leave: The leave period was lengthened from 8 weeks to 12 weeks for the first four births, and four weeks’ maternity leave was established for adoptions.
4. Paid child care leave: Two days of employer-paid statutory child care leave were introduced for each working parent with children under age seven.
5. The “Work-Life Works!” fund: A S\$10 million fund was set up, and all private sector organizations were eligible to apply for grants from the fund to defray the cost of introducing measures to help employees better achieve work-life harmony.

The most recent changes in pronatalist policies supporting work-life balance were introduced in August 2008. These include the following:

1. paid maternity leave was extended from 12 to 16 weeks; the last eight weeks of leave may be taken flexibly over a period of 12 months if there is mutual agreement between employer and employee;
2. maternity leave protection was introduced, such that employers are required to pay maternity leave benefits if the woman is dismissed without sufficient cause within six months before the birth of the child or retrenched within the last three months of pregnancy;
3. paid child care leave was extended from two to six days per year; and
4. six days’ unpaid infant care leave was introduced.

Cheung (1989) suggests that the increased labor force participation rate of married women helped to counter the effectiveness of pronatalist measures, and that the policies placed a high dual demand—both to reproduce and to participate in the labor force—on women. Cheung further predicts that the success of the new pronatalist population policies will depend largely on the willingness of women to reconcile their career with a larger family size. More recent work, however, suggests that it is important to examine how both men and women relate to pronatalist policies. For example, Teo and Yeoh (1999) demonstrate that the private and public spheres are interpenetrated rather than divided into “a domestic sphere for women and a public/work sphere for men” (Teo & Yeoh, 1999: 88). In the most recent survey, Jones, Straughan, and Chan (2009: 187) make the following observation:

perhaps the most significant change in the post-2000 population policies is the ideological change regarding men’s role in the family. In 2000, paternity leave [three days for fathers in the civil service] was introduced as part of the new population policies. . . . for the first time, men were considered to be directly involved in child care. In addition, men are now eligible to take unrecorded child care leave, which was previously only available to their female counterparts in the civil service.

As noted in the introductory section, however, existing studies have left a few critical questions unanswered: Do citizens’ life plans differ? How do they differ? What is the relationship between citizens’ life plans and their responses to pronatalist policies? What, if any, might be the appropriate role of the government in supporting their efforts to balance work and life?

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given that previous research has repeatedly found that Singaporeans treat childbearing as a “private” and “personal” decision (Graham, 1995; Teo & Yeoh, 1999), snowball sampling is an appropriate research strategy. As Berg (2009: 51) notes, snowball sampling is “particularly popular among researchers interested in studying . . . sensitive topics, or difficult-to-reach populations.” I started with 11 research assistants who were senior university students (seven were Singaporean-Chinese, two were Singaporean-Indians, and two were Singaporean-Malays). Each of these 11 research assistants then contacted 15 interviewees who were women of childbearing age, the group targeted by the pronatalist population policies. In total, these research assistants carried out a semistructured interview schedule (which I proposed and revised based on the pilot study) with 165 women aged between 19 and 49. The interviews were conducted in English, Malay, or Tamil, depending on the comfort level of the respondents. The length of the semistructured interviews in the first stage of the project was usually 30-45

minutes. Each interview was recorded on tape and transcribed verbatim (and translated when necessary).

Of the respondents, 51 were married individuals and 114 were unmarried individuals; 32 were self-identified as Malays, 24 as Indians, 105 as Chinese, and 4 as “Others”; 105 respondents had received university education or were receiving such education during the interview period, and 60 did not have any university education (one interviewee did not disclose her educational level); 131 respondents lived in government-subsidized apartments (Housing and Development Board units), and 32 lived in private properties including condominiums and landed properties (two interviewees declined to disclose their housing type). With regard to monthly household income, 40 individuals lived in lower-income households with a monthly income below S\$3,000; 85 lived in middle-income households with a monthly income of S\$3,000-7,999; and 38 lived in higher-income households with a monthly income above S\$8,000 (two interviewees declined to reveal their income level).

In terms of national-level data, in 2000, 11.7% of the resident nonstudent population aged 15 years and over had university qualifications (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001); in 2007, 27.2% of employed resident households earned a monthly income of at least S\$8,000; and in 2008, 16.5% of employed resident households lived in private condominiums and private houses (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009a). In comparison with the national data, the average level of education of the respondents in this study is clearly higher, reflecting the participation of young unmarried university students. The participants’ dwelling types and monthly household income, however, are only slightly higher than the national distribution.

During this study, once an individual woman felt comfortable with the topic, I asked her to participate in the second and third stages, that is, in focus group discussions together with the individuals whom she had identified in her survey answers as having had a strong influence on her childbearing decisions. The individuals included in the second stage were mostly husbands or boyfriends, and in a few cases friends of the same sex. In the third stage, the focus group interviews were conducted with the individual woman (and/or her significant others) and her parents or parents-in-law. All participation was voluntary, and respondents who joined the study in the second and third stages provided their written demographic information after the discussion. In all, I conducted 39 focus group interviews. Typically there were four to six participants in each focus group interview. The length of the discussions was usually 60-90 minutes.

Sussman et al. (1991) found that focus group data tended to make subjects’ responses more extreme than responses offered in response to survey questionnaires. This also happened during the collection of data for this study—particularly when respondents were asked why they wanted more than one child. During the face-to-face interviews, women tended to give minimalist, even cryptic explanations of why they desired a specific number of children, but then in the

focus group discussions, their explanations became more elaborate and substantial as a result of questioning from other group participants.

In essence, the research design tries to approximate decision-making processes by providing appropriate settings. For the first-stage semistructured interviews, conducted between October and December 2007, the interview schedule was divided into four sections. The first section focused on the value of children. The second section inquired about an individual's attitudes and opinions about marriage and paid employment. The third section elicited responses to the government's pronatalist policies. The fourth section collected the respondents' demographic information. With regard to the focus group interviews in the second and third stages, conducted from January to July 2008, the discussion revolved around four central questions:

1. the role of the baby bonus (or child care subsidy) in the decision to have an additional child;
2. the role of education subsidies in the decision to have a(nother) child;
3. the degree to which the availability of public housing influenced the decision-making process; and
4. the ideal balance between work and family life for a couple.

All 204 interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and translated. As Berg (2009: 148) wrote regarding the analysis of data obtained from interviews, "typically, a systematic indexing process begins as researchers set up several sheets of paper with major topics of interest listed separately. . . . Ideally, this process should be accomplished by two or more researchers/coders, independently reading and coding each of several transcripts." Two research assistants and I independently read all 204 interview transcripts and coded them on the perceptions and responses with regard to

1. existing paid maternity leave,
 2. existing paid paternity leave, and
 3. existing child care leave, as well as
 4. suggestions for the improvement of existing work-family balance policies.
- Each individual's responses with regard to the leave policies (including policies on maternity, paternity, and child care leave) were coded as "positive," "mixed," "negative," or "no comments."

We then met to discuss our coding so that the whole data set could be coded into one master index sheet and entered into the SPSS quantitative analysis software and the NVivo qualitative analysis software. Where there were disagreements over which category to assign for any given respondent, the decision was

1. to follow the majority (when one coder disagreed with the other two coders) or
2. to reach a consensus after discussion (when each coder assigned a different category).

Most of the responses were coded straightforwardly into the master copy and the computer software programs, because the codes assigned were identical among the coders.

I examine patterns in the data from the 165 women and analyze the themes of the focus group interviews to flesh out and explore possible explanations for the patterns observed in the 165 interviews. I identify two groups of women respondents—“career oriented” and “family oriented”—based on their answers to the semistructured interview questionnaires. The interviewees were asked to answer this questionnaire item: “If you have a child or would like to have a child, your ideal choice is to

1. not work before and after having a child/children,
2. keep working after having a child/children, or
3. quit your job after having a child/children.” The interviewers then probed further for justifications.

Two research assistants and I coded the answers and identified two groups of women respondents:

1. family-oriented women: both married and unmarried women who voluntarily want to quit their job when they have children (but may not be able to realize this ideal because of other considerations) and stay-at-home mothers, women who ideally and in real life do not work after marriage and childbearing; and
2. career-oriented women: women who ideally want to keep working after having children.

In other words, I assessed a woman’s identification with family or work primarily in terms of whether she would change her behavior temporarily or permanently after childbirth. Among the 114 unmarried survey respondents, 72 were career-oriented women who would ideally like to keep working after childbirth and 34 were family-oriented women who would ideally quit after childbirth (8 respondents did not give a clear indication of their preference). Among the 51 married survey respondents, 10 were career-oriented women and 38 were family oriented (3 respondents did not give a clear answer). As will be further elaborated in the following section, citizens’ responses to government policies vary consistently according to their aspirations for a life centered on paid employment or on family, as well as according to the way in which they perceive workplace expectations and the consequences of not meeting such expectations. If responses to pronatalist policies vary according to individuals’ own aspirations, the question then becomes, of course, which women are likely to be career oriented and which are likely to be family oriented? Data analysis shows that within each ethnic group, university-educated women are more career oriented than their less highly educated counterparts. Among women without a university education, Chinese women are more family oriented than Malay and

Indian women; among university graduates, Malay women are more family oriented than Chinese and Indian women. It is also important to note that in this study, all the participants were from employed resident households (households with at least one working person). Thus, the concerns of resident households with no working person are not reflected in the study.

The participants are referred to by pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality. Married respondents are given the honorifics “Mr.” and “Mrs.,” while unmarried respondents are referred to by their first names. Those surveyed in the first-stage semi-structured interviews are referred to as “respondents,” while participants in the focus group discussions are referred to as “interviewees.” Where I quote from the data, I retain the original words of the respondents, including words in “Singlish”—a local version of English—and provide clarification where necessary.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of and Responses to Maternity Leave

In their answers to the following list of open-ended survey questions, the majority of the women interviewed individually did not make evaluative comments about whether the existing paid maternity leave policy encouraged them to have an additional child.

1. Was there anything the government did that helped you decide to have a child/children? (question for married respondents)
2. If you are deciding whether to have a child, is there anything the government can do that will help you decide? (question for unmarried respondents)
3. As far as you know, has the government done anything to help families in Singapore? If so, can you please tell me what the Singapore government has done? If not, what do you think needs to be done by the government to help families?
4. As far as you know, is there any government policy that encourages people to have more children? If so, can you please tell me what those policies are? Which policies do you think actually work? Among these policies, which one(s) do you think are not working? If not, what needs to be done by the government in terms of policies to encourage people to have more children?

Among the 165 interviewees, 26 made evaluative comments (19 replied that the maternity leave policy was encouraging, while 7 replied that it was not working). While such small numbers do not allow for any conclusive statement, the pattern is that family-oriented women are more likely than career-oriented women to reply positively; conversely, career-oriented women are more likely

than their family-oriented counterparts to reply that the existing maternity leave policy is not working. In the text below, I first draw on interview data from these 26 respondents.

Why Paid Maternity Leave Is Welcomed, Especially by Family-Oriented Women

Maternity leave is consistently regarded in a positive way by family-oriented women. Mrs. Khaw (age 28, university graduate), the mother of one-year-old Nicholas, was employed as a teacher but has become a full-time homemaker. During the interview, she said:

I think the extended paid maternity leave definitely encourages mothers to have children because they have ease of mind in knowing that ‘I have time to look after my child and at the same time, I wouldn’t lose that financial support.’ That is a very important policy.

Similarly, family-oriented Mrs. Pang (age 46, secondary school education) thought paid maternity leave “actually works” because mothers “can see to the infant.” Family-oriented Mrs. Hamid (age 24, university graduate) concurred: “Because being a teacher, you are entitled to at most three months’ maternity leave, and after that you are guaranteed a job. It’s not like since you take maternity leave, you’ll be dismissed from the company. So that is important, especially for households where it’s needed for both to work.”

Career-oriented Mrs. Lee (age 26, university graduate) explained the importance of maternity leave with guaranteed jobs: “I am a civil servant, so if you’re talking about basic things for me, the two months’ maternity leave—or even the third month that they are extending now—helps, because it gives me more time to take care of my newly born child.”

In summary, extended paid maternity leave is deemed encouraging because it allows mothers to spend time with their newborns without losing income. For career-oriented women, however, the effectiveness of such a policy is contingent on a job guarantee—as is the case with government employees, including teachers and civil servants. As we shall see, however, this does not apply to many women working in the private sector.

Why Paid Maternity Leave Is Ineffective, Especially for Career-Oriented Women

Some citizens, as parents and prospective parents, said that the existing paid maternity leave was not effective. The problems associated with such ineffectiveness are primarily the lack of a job guarantee and perceived employer discrimination against women who are likely to take maternity leave. For example, career-oriented Yu Ping (age 20, university student) had the following exchange with the interviewer:

Interviewer: Among these policies, which one do you think is not working?

Yu Ping: Maternity leave.

Interviewer: Why?

Yu Ping: Because companies don't like pregnant people to get leave. Eventually they will get fired. There's no guarantee [of being retained].

Career-oriented Mrs. Khoo (age 30, university graduate) concurred: "The employers may not like the idea of women or their workers being on leave for three months. OK, it's a fact that a lot of bosses don't like to employ mothers or women because they will have three months of maternity leave and then it will affect their work. . . . Even though there is this law, there are still women who are actually victims of employers who want to still dismiss them, even though there's this law."

Indeed, job insecurity is one of the main reasons that explain differences in attitude toward existing maternity leave policies. While 14 out of 72 family-oriented women mentioned such a concern, the figure was higher—21 out of 82—for career-oriented women. Perhaps even more tellingly, career-oriented women were more likely than their family-oriented counterparts to express a desire for maternity leave with legal protection. For instance, career-oriented Mei Ting (age 21, university student) explained:

Because women are facing problems such as employers not wanting them, when they are pregnant and things like that, perhaps the government can step in to have a law or regulation that will protect women, married and getting pregnant. Because we have heard of employers and people who are criticizing those who are pregnant and not working.

The perception of job insecurity related to leave taking is pervasive. Sunthari (age 30, university graduate) commented that "there is a catch there [in the maternity leave provision]. Some companies if they do find out—you read all these letters in the [*Straits Times*] Forum and everything—these mothers get terminated the minute they are found out, you know they are expecting, and then three months, a lot of people say, 'Wow, what am I going to do without you for three months?'"

Latifa, a 20-year-old university student, shared the same sentiment: "Maternity leave . . . [should come with] the certainty that they won't see that as a liability, like they won't discourage you getting promoted or [be instrumental in your] losing your job."

Raziya (age 20, university student) put it in a positive way: "Women who have careers should have rights. They should be able to take the nine months off and still return to their jobs and be guaranteed that [the jobs are] still there."

In short, more days of maternity leave are welcomed particularly by family-oriented women who would ideally like to quit their jobs—but in reality may not—and care for their children. In contrast, women who ideally want to keep

working after having children have strong reservations over the existing paid maternity leave, as their concern is the lack of legal protection of their jobs if they take leave. In other words, it is critical to have state protection against dismissal by the employer on the grounds of family leave of absence.

Kinds of Institutional Support Sought by Women

Family-oriented women were also more likely to suggest flexible work hours as an additional policy initiative that would encourage women to consider more births. For instance, Mrs. Kuek (age 30, university graduate), who has two children but has continued working, said, “You need supportive bosses, because if you have children, it also means that sometimes you need to go back [home] early. There’s a need to strike a better balance in work. I wouldn’t be able to stay in the office for 12 hours a day.”

Kadijah (age 21, university student) said, “What the government can do for me is in terms of my working time. . . . There should be flexibility in my working time. Help me be there for my children . . . and at the same time still contribute to the economy.”

Mrs. Hamid (age 23, university graduate), a contract teacher with one child, sees flexible work hours and on-site child care centers as options: “Flexible working hours that I can clock in anytime, any day, or even the ability to work from home. Or even if I can’t work from home, maybe a child care center at the workplace [would encourage me to have another child] . . . so instead of sending my child somewhere else and go to work, I can just bring them.”

Interview data also suggest that the work culture of long work hours underlies respondents’ requests for institutionalized flexible work hours. Average work hours are longer in the sales and service sector than in the manufacturing sector. At the same time, the sales and service sector is the sector in which jobs have grown and will grow (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2005). Rashida (age 21, university student), who ideally wants to keep working after having children, explained how the reality of long hours undermines the rhetoric of work-family balance:

Government incentives . . . OK, they have been going on and on with the work-life balance thing, but by the look of it, it’s not exactly true. You are still expected to work beyond the working hours even during weekdays. From what I notice, when I go to these recruitment talks, you have to work like [up to] 8 [pm.], sometimes you have to work 24-7. I mean, the government says that it is a five-day week and weekends you can be with the family and stuff. But you have to be realistic here.

Similarly, Meena (age 34, university graduate) suggested that “They [the government] would really need to look into the number of hours, especially I feel for mothers; they really have to be mindful that the mothers really don’t take home any work to do.” She added: “The government has this thing called

‘Eat with Your Family Day,’ which I personally feel is so ridiculous because you promote that one day in the entire year, out of 365 days, to eat with your family—so everybody has to go home; your employers are not supposed to keep you in school or at work, or wherever, and then you are supposed to go eat with your family for one day; then what happens to the rest of the time?” In other words, these respondents articulated the need for the “right to request flexi-work” that is available in the British Employment Act or the “right to shorter and flexible working hours” included in the Norwegian Working Environment Act.

Finally, with regard to the linkage between the Central Provident Fund (CPF) social security program and the state’s work-family balance policies, the government’s initiative includes the following: “The Medisave Maternity Package allows you to withdraw up to \$450 of Medisave for the pre-delivery medical expenses for all your children. This is in addition to the amount of Medisave that can be used for delivery” (Ministry of Health, 2008). However, use of the Medisave account is perceived by respondents as “still using our own money,” which does not satisfy citizens’ wish for more state-provided subsidies. This is illustrated, for instance, in the focus group discussion, quoted below, with Mr. Lee and his wife Mrs. Lee (age 36, combined income of S\$10,000 and over), who held their infant during the interview:

Moderator: If the government really wants to help . . .

Mr. Lee: Up-front cost hospitalization, delivery charges like, you know, we went to Mount A, she [referring to Mrs. Lee] did a Cesarean, more than S\$7,000. . . .

The gynecological fees and everything, so that up-front [subsidies] would definitely be helpful.

Mrs. Lee: That’s already up-front, and then not to mention actually that the nine months you are carrying the baby to go back to see the gynecologist. The medical checkup and everything.

Moderator: So how did you finance those?

Mrs. Lee: Through our own means. Through our own money. But I think they do give.

Apparently they are saying you can still claim your Medisave. But it’s your own money. They [the government] allow, but it’s still your own money.

This exchange suggests that Medisave-like programs that are part of the Central Provident Fund (with contributions from the employer and the employee) fall short of workers’ expectations for the state’s active protection of their reproductive rights.

Paid Paternity Leave Is Not Crucial for Most Men

Extra days of paternity leave would help, but this is not the deciding factor for fathers and prospective fathers when they are considering an additional child. Men place more emphasis on financial concerns than on paternity leave days. This is reflected in the focus group discussions. For instance, Mr. Lee (age 36, university graduate) said, “Giving parents leave and all that, it’s definitely good, but then again, it’s not something that will push the couple to have kids. Having kids is a long-term [commitment], it’s not [as if] three days’ leave [from work] will tilt the balance to make you decide to have more kids.”

The way that child rearing is perceived by men is primarily predicated on the role of fathers as breadwinners, as Mr. Balasingam (age 34, diploma holder) articulated:

The fact of life is, when you’re married, father is supposed to provide bread and butter, so everything is money. Although some people may think it’s not so, but that’s the reality of life. If you cannot provide for the family, you’re a failure. Your wife will ask you: “Why [do] you want kids? Why should we have more kids when you will not be able to fulfill the [financial responsibility]?” If I can’t convince my wife . . . [when] women become mothers, they are very concerned about their children and not their husbands. They want to know whether their child will have adequate medical [care]. If you can’t do something, as a husband . . . you’re going to get hell when you go back [i.e., return home].

A focus group interview with two university students—Thomas (age 22) and Chuan Hock (age 25)—highlights the predominant views of the work demands of the private sector in Singapore. Thomas wanted to have two children, but he warned that he would not take leave from work, so as “not to influence my position in my job.” Indeed, even if more leave days were provided for in government policy, he said, “it all depends on the bosses. . . . Your boss says ‘I want you back tomorrow,’ you’ve got to be back tomorrow no matter what the government says.” Chuan Hock, too, was skeptical about the prospect of a more generous leave policy:

You’re in Singapore. In Singapore, you need to work, you don’t work you die. . . . Even if the government gives support, cool. What about the private sector? How are they going to react to it?

This skepticism was echoed in the focus group discussion, quoted below, with university students Chee Keong (age 24) and his girlfriend, Hui Lin (age 22), who were both anticipating a demanding life in the corporate world, especially in light of their own aspirations. Chee Keong said:

I think it’s very hard for the government to help in terms of the labor market, because it’s really your personal wants and what you really want to achieve. Say I’m going to work as an auditor. My job is from 9 to 5, but because I want

to go up the corporate ladder, I will work harder. Even if there's this thing called the five-day week, how many people really work five days, other than civil servants? So it's really about our personal wants. It's not so much what the government can [do to] help. They can give us guys maternity [*sic*] leave, but will I go for maternity [*sic*] leave? I will not go, right?

Hui Lin also highlighted the role of work pressures:

Especially in Singapore, where everything is so work based, it's efficiency based. So it's very hard to [take] leave. You're worried about your work, and you're worried about your kid. It's very stressful. The whole environment in Singapore is very stressful, actually.

For his part, Chee Keong also expects little empathy from male corporate leaders:

How many married men really take care of the kids? Seriously, let's say the CEO of any company. How much time does he have to take care of the kids when you're seeing the CEO there every day? I mean, for a corporate world, for a private company, would the CEO want to encourage family life more, or does he want to encourage the employee to work harder? I'm sure the CEO wants to encourage the employee to work harder. So that would be at the top of his mind, even if he's a married man.

Thus, there is a palpable sense that men feel they are primarily responsible for being the breadwinners; for the better-educated and higher-income men, the pressures are exacerbated by their own job expectations. The responsibility of being breadwinners, however, seems even more difficult for men in lower-income households to meet, because of a lack of job security. For example, Mr. Chong (age 49, no formal education) made the following observation with regard to young couples' unwillingness to have an additional child. He compared conditions in the past to conditions in the present:

It was because the economic environment was not as bad as it is now. It was very easy to find a job then. First, there was no problem in finding odd jobs and so on. Now, when you are asking for an odd job, people would first ask how old you are and carry on by saying, "No, we hire Chinese [i.e., new labor immigrants from the People's Republic of China] here." The Chinese provide very cheap labor. They would tell me that they can hire three Chinese workers with S\$30 but only one worker with the same amount if they were to hire me. So one should not think of the issue of children if [a man] cannot even find an odd job.

Indeed, in 2008, 35% of paid employment was filled by foreign labor (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009b). Job insecurity is also seen as a problem by men in middle-income households, and it seems to be perceived that there is a generational difference in the job market for Singaporeans.

Why Paternity Leave Is Sought by Some Men as a National Program

While male respondents clearly view the financial burden of childbearing and child rearing as a central concern, they also think there are good reasons—such as supporting their wives—why paternity leave should be extended. Doubts about paternity leave can be further allayed if such leave is legislated and treated in the same way as the National Service “in-camp training” policy—that is, applied across the board rather than left to the company’s discretion. In Singapore, not only do male citizens undergo two years’ compulsory full-time military service when they reach the age of 18, but they are also required to report annually for up to 40 days a year for in-camp reservist training until the age of 50 for commissioned officers and until the age of 40 for others. All public organizations and private-sector companies must allow the National Service men to fulfill their reservist duties without taking unpaid leave; the government pays their salaries for the duration of the training period.

As Ismail (age 24, polytechnic diploma) explained: “Even though I work in a private sector, I got the paternity leave. I think it’s helpful [in encouraging people to have more children]. It’s the same like for a guy who work in a private sector has to go for the reservist. It’s the same. If this is a government policy, I shouldn’t be worried [about taking leave]. If the government manages to implement this policy like the reservist policy, this shouldn’t be a problem because it can be like a standard thing in every company, whether it is a private or public sector, if the government can successfully implement this policy.”

Notably, the idea of implementing one week’s paid paternity leave in a manner akin to the implementation of the policy on reservist training is repeatedly suggested. In other words, men are in favor of state legislation to take away company discretion that may not support the taking of paternity leave. Mr. Owyong, a 55-year-old company owner with a teenage daughter, summed up the reality and the necessity for state legislative provision: “Manpower, they [i.e., companies] try to stretch each individual to prolong their working hour. They don’t mind paying a little bit more, because that is a controllable [amount]. . . . Except those like the NS [i.e., National Service] men. They [companies] have no other alternative; there’s a law . . . that the employee has to go.”

Thus, a number of interviewees—fathers and prospective fathers—do appreciate the demands that come with fatherhood; they also look for more institutional support from both the state and the private sector.

Women’s and Men’s Perceptions of Child Care Leave

To begin with, it is important that child care leave days be paid for by the government rather than financed by employers. As Mrs. Balasingam (age 34, diploma) pointed out, “I’m working longer hours, but I think this is the time [when

the child is sick] that I need to spend time with my kid. They need me, but I'm not able to be there as I need to go to work. Even if he falls [really] sick, I take no-pay leave . . . no-pay leave, no-pay leave, then who's going to have the pay?" The question becomes that of how to finance such leave.

Mrs. Ravindran (age 51, diploma), a human resource manager, articulated the need to extend such leave provision: "The government must come with the fund because if you just ask companies to do this, they will never do this."

Mrs. Ravindran's idea that private enterprise will not provide child care leave if there is no government support reveals a significant obstacle in helping individuals balance work and family responsibilities. In what follows, I highlight a dialogue in the focus group interview with a young Chinese couple, Mr. and Mrs. Wong (both age 27, university graduates), illustrating the dilemmas faced by employers, especially owners of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Mrs. Wong: For my organization [a multinational company], we actually have five [days] per child. But it's child care sick leave. It's only when the child is sick that you are entitled to the sick leave. You know, from my colleagues' perspective, from those who have children, they wouldn't want to take MC [Medical-Certificate warranted leave], because they are afraid that they would be penalized. I guess the employer wouldn't explicitly punish you in a way. But perhaps at the end of the year, they might take into consideration that you are on too many days of MC.

Mr. Wong: But in an employer's view, it's quite disturbing when the child is sick, and they take leave, and there's no one to cover her job.

Mrs. Wong: This is the problem of Singapore culture. . . . Singapore's employment culture. As compared to the other countries, as in maybe London. I have a friend. She's working in London, and she mentioned that her colleague, who's actually a Singaporean, actually wants to quit her Singapore job and she wants to settle in London, because the employers there are very pro-family. It's like [in the case of] her pregnancy, they actually have a room for her to rest. Because pregnancy stage is actually very tiring, so they will actually allow her to nap for one or two hours and things like that. And London's maternity [leave] is like six months or whatever, so I guess the employer is very nice in a way whereby you can actually go off when you finish your work, just to spend time with your family. You don't need to stay until 5:30, when it's the official time to knock off.

Mr. Wong: You cannot compare Western country and Asian country.

Mrs. Wong: You see, this is the mentality of a Chinese employer, I mean, Singapore's employer.

Mr. Wong: We [the employers] are the ones who suffer. For small companies, small organization, we are the ones suffering.

Mrs. Wong: Because they are very lean. They only have two or three support staff, so that's why when one is down, then . . .

Mr. Wong: That's why the boss has to know all the things.

Mrs. Wong: So that he can take over. I guess in a way, like the child care sick leave, it can be something like the last four weeks of the maternity whereby the government pay for it, in order to help the SME [small and medium-sized enterprises]. Because to the employer, it's a loss to them, so we can actually compensate.

A number of important themes are reflected in the little "argument" between Mrs. Wong and her husband. Mrs. Wong criticizes what she sees as the unsympathetic view of employers toward employees taking child care sick leave, blaming it on the "Singapore culture" or the "employment culture" in Singapore, especially when compared with practices elsewhere. However, Mr. Wong, himself an employer, attempts to elaborate on the difficulties faced by the company whose work responsibilities cannot be adequately covered. The point that both of them make, however, is that a proper or adequate system of child care sick leave cannot be instituted without government support.

CONCLUSION

It is important to study both state policy "on paper" and the reality of working couples' lives in emerging Asian countries. As Hakim (2003) points out, a critical step is to inquire into and acknowledge the emerging diversity of individual orientations toward family and paid employment. This study finds that some women would ideally like to quit their jobs when they have children, and some would ideally not want to quit their jobs. Likewise, while most men still treat their financial responsibility to the family as primary, some articulate the importance of spending time with their family as well. Moreover, even given the limitations of nonprobability sampling, this study indicates that "individual" preference is associated with an individual's educational attainment and ethnic culture. Specifically, university-educated women are more career oriented than their less highly educated counterparts. Among university graduates, Malay women are more family oriented than Chinese and Indian women. Whether and how education and ethnicity interact with individuals' orientations could be further examined through quantitative analysis using a representative sample. Additionally, this study concludes that the effectiveness of any work-family balance policy is a function not merely of individual aspirations but also of the perceived consequences of (not) meeting workplace expectations. Thus, the current policies are particularly ineffective in addressing the concerns of employees in private firms, whose share of the labor market has increased in recent years.

Broadly speaking, the existing work-family balance policies are most effective in meeting the needs of family-oriented women but not career-oriented women, stay-at-home mothers, and men; in other words, these latter groups are not encouraged by state initiatives. Family-oriented women are more likely than their

career-oriented counterparts to suggest that paid maternity leave encourages mothers to have more children, largely because it allows mothers to spend time with their newborns without losing their income. However, the provision of paid maternity leave is insufficient to encourage career-oriented women, who ideally want to keep working after having children. For example, they perceive taking paid maternity leave as jeopardizing job security or promotion. Career-oriented women do not lack a sense of family attachment, but they do place significant importance on their paid employment. Without a sense of job security, they view the work-family balance policies as inadequate.

In addition, responses from working women indicate that they are aware of—and do not shy away from—the demands of both work and family. However, they need help from the state to make it possible for them to meet such demands successfully; specifically, respondents suggest the institutional provision of on-site child care centers so that working mothers can easily visit their children, and flexible work hours so that parents can attend to their children if care is required at home.

With respect to the joint efforts of men and women in providing familial care, while men with stay-at-home wives do not find the lack of paternity leave unsatisfactory, other men articulate the ideal and reality of involved fatherhood and suggest that longer paid paternity leave and more routine family time would be helpful. Moreover, they suggest specific ways in which paid paternity leave provision can be effective. By frequently invoking the analogy of the National Service reservist policy, they are implicitly asking the state to treat childbearing and child rearing as a top national priority.

Understanding how individuals in different groups respond to policies becomes even more important if we take into account the following statistics. In 2005, of all married couples in Singapore, 44% were dual-career couples; 36% were husband/breadwinner–wife/homemaker couples; 5.5% had wives as sole breadwinners; and 14.5% had no income earners (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2008).

Finally, it is important that leave provisions be financed by the government rather than paid for by employers; this is one of the key ways in which the state can support individuals in ensuring that their paid employment will, at a minimum, not be jeopardized by childbearing and the responsibilities of child rearing.

The fact that in this study only women respondents—not men—articulated the need for structural accommodations in the workplace may reflect the fact that in Singapore, gender role relations in the family remain traditional. State policies, however, can either maintain the status quo or channel behaviors in new directions. Given that citizens are suggesting specific ways to encourage a more egalitarian sharing of roles, such as longer paid paternity leave and individual entitlement to child care leave days, the law's function of disciplining corporate behaviors in this instance is welcomed, so that fathers, should they wish, can be enabled to care for their family and children.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun
Division of Sociology
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
HSS-05-48, 14 Nanyang Drive
Singapore 637332
e-mail: HLSUN@ntu.edu.sg