

Tenth Family Research Network (FRN) Forum: “Woman, Wife & Working Mother — The Role of Women in the Family”

5 November 2013

A total of 140 participants from the government, social service sector and academia attended the forum. It began with three presentations and these were followed by a Question and Answer (Q&A) session.

Presentation 1: “Dual-Career Singaporean Couples: What Affects the Pattern and Distribution of Unpaid Labour?” by Dr Mathew Mathews (Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore)

This presentation shared findings from a subset of a nationally representative sample in the Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2012 commissioned by the National Population Talent Division, Prime Minister’s Office. The responses reported were mainly those of full-time employed married women from dual-income families. Where relevant, comparisons were also made with responses from male respondents whose wives were employed full-time.

Dr Mathews began the presentation by noting that there was substantial involvement of foreign domestic workers and other family members (notably, grandparents) in some essential childcare tasks such as feeding, bathing and fetching young children to and from school. However, gendered division of domestic work among Singaporean families remained deeply rooted. Tasks that were undertaken “mostly” by women in these dual-career households included cooking, staying at home when a child was ill, and supervising the domestic helper. Men, in contrast, did most of the household repairs, washed the car and paid bills. Dr Mathews also noted that men in the study self-reported more “shared” domestic involvement than what women reported their husband’s involvement to be.

Among the factors that affected the division of labour, mothers did more domestic work when fathers had comparatively longer work hours. Women who provided more childcare were also more likely to subscribe to the “intensive mothering” ideology, i.e., that childrearing should be child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive. Lower-educated or lower-income working mothers were also more likely to engage in housework (as distinct from childcare), which Dr Mathews suggested was likely to be a product of their lower resources and acceptance of the gender role ideology (defined as entrenched beliefs about the appropriate responsibilities of men and women).

Men, on the other hand, did more domestic work when their wives had to travel for work and when women had poorer work-life balance. Hence the work context is also an important force that shapes the division of labour.

Family size and the age of the children, i.e. where there are more children and where children are younger, also increased the father’s involvement in domestic work although this is mostly in “gender-compatible” tasks such as fetching the children to and from school and household repairs. According to Dr Mathews, values such as intensive mothering did not necessarily inhibit male participation in domestic work, but they did increase women’s likelihood of doing child-related domestic work. When women held such values less strongly, they were more open to having others perform childcare functions.

In concluding, Dr Mathews noted that women were generally happy with their existing arrangement, despite having to “do substantial domestic labour”. He surmised that this was the result of negotiation between the spouses.

Presentation 2: “Women’s Employment and Work-Family-Balance Policies in Singapore” by Associate Professor Shirley Sun (Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University)

This presentation was based on A/P Sun’s qualitative research on Singapore’s work-family balance policies that had been implemented since 2000. The study involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 165 women of childbearing age and 39 focus group discussions with women, their peers, parents, spouses and prospective spouses. The research was carried out over the period October 2007–July 2008.¹

Maternity leave policy

The study found that family-oriented women (i.e. those who expressed a desire to voluntarily leave their jobs when they had children felt that the paid maternity leave policy is “effective” as it allows mothers to spend time with newborns without losing their incomes. On the other hand, career-oriented women (i.e. those who would, ideally, remain in the workforce after having children felt that the paid maternity leave policy is “ineffective” as it lacks job guarantee, and there was a perception that employers discriminate against women who take or apply for such leave. Participants of the study also hoped to get more institutional support such as flexible working hours or on-site childcare services.

Paternity leave policy

According to A/P Sun, a slight change in the paternity leave policy to make it a national programme could help increase male participation in domestic work. For the majority of male participants in the study, paid paternity leave was not as crucial because men placed more emphasis on financial concerns. Financial stability was seen as more important and men felt primarily responsible as breadwinners.

Sick childcare leave

A/P Sun explained that with our deep-rooted traditions where men play the role of provider, taking leave when a child is ill would be first expected of the mother and not the father. Further, as smaller companies generally found it harder to implement family-friendly policies, she suggested that the government should fund such leave. The indirect benefit of such policy change would be the strengthening of marriage bonds as men support their wives.

Presentation 3: “Quest for Authenticity: How the Family Fits In With High-Achieving Women’s Leadership Roles” by Dr Sophia Zhao (Research Associate, CCL – Asia Pacific, Center for Creative Leadership)

This presentation was based on three books written by researchers from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).

According to Dr Zhao, women who are “authentic” have the ability to identify their personal values and priorities and know how to achieve them while understanding the trade-offs required. To achieve work-life balance, a woman should be “authentic”, she said. The importance of authenticity could be seen at the individual level or at the organisational level.

1. It should be noted that the study was carried out well before the most recent enhancement of the Marriage & Parenthood Package in January 2013, which addressed some of the issues mentioned by respondents (see http://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/NPTD/news/ jcr_content/par_content/download_94/file.res/Press%20Release%202013%20MP%20Package%20_Annex%20AB_.pdf, especially Annex A-4)

At the individual level, an authentic woman has more energy and improved psychological well-being. This positive attitude enables them to participate fully in the organisation.

Question and Answer (Q&A), moderated by Associate Professor Thang Leng Leng (Department of Japanese Studies, NUS)

The following points were raised during the Q&A:

Whilst dual-income families are becoming more common in Singapore, traditional values and culture run deep in our society where men place more priority on jobs and women on children. This has led to women taking on a “second shift” at home. Whilst male participation in domestic work and parenting has increased, decreasing to some degree the distinction between the genders, it was also noted that barriers to male participation remain. Many men may not do domestic work not just because of traditional values; it could also be due to their not having the know-how or the sense that they could be good at it. For these reasons, men too require recognition and support. Apart from helping to lessen the load on mothers, studies have shown that fathers’ involvement in their children’s education has a positive impact on the latter’s progression in life.

It was noted that the government has been implementing family-friendly policies, including paternity leave, to encourage shared parenting. However Dr Mathews felt that Singapore could follow the Nordic countries where paternity leave cannot be shared between the parents and would be forfeited when not used. This has led to higher male participation in domestic work. A/P Sun noted that while large companies in her study generally have more family-friendly policies — possibly because they have more resources — employers in small and medium sized companies (SMEs) were concerned about costs and their ability to source for temporary staff.

Employees also had concerns in utilising family-friendly policies available to them. According to Dr Zhao, her study revealed that the usage was much lower than would be expected when compared to the actual availability of such policies. Nevertheless, when employees perceived the availability of such family-friendly policies or culture, the trust between employers and employees increased.

A human resource practitioner suggested that the misalignment between policy and practice has left family-friendly policies such as maternity leave impractical. The process of hiring and training a temporary replacement requires too much time and thus the burden would usually be shared among colleagues for the few months as the new mother is away on maternity leave.

Dr Zhao also noted that most of the high-achieving women she interviewed were very focused on the family. These women were also authentic and were willing to make trade-offs, for example, promotion in exchange for time with the family. Being authentic also meant sticking to their personal values.

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